

# **John T. SOWLE:**

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## John T. Sowle

Today is June 5, 1996. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer for Midway Village and Museum Center, Rockford, Illinois, which is cooperating with the statewide effort of Illinois to collect oral histories from World War II Veterans that participated in the momentous events that occurred during World War II. We are in the office of Midway Village interviewing Dr. John Sowle. Dr. Sowle served in the branch of the military armed services during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experience in that war.

**NELSON:** John, would you please start by introducing yourself by giving us your full name, place and date of birth. We would also like the name of each of your parents.

**SOWLE:** My name is John T. Sowle. I was born in Rockford, Illinois, in 1920. My parents—my father was Charles J. Sowle and my mother was Gertrude Elizabeth Stewart, then of course, Sowle. My father was a dentist and he was the one that developed the ROTC program in Rockford at Central High School for several years on a volunteer basis.

**NELSON:** Did you have any brothers or sisters?

**SOWLE:** Yes, I have one brother that is living who is a dentist. I also had two more brothers, Stewart Sowle, who also was a dentist in Rockford and \_\_\_?\_\_\_Sowle who was in the dental business and two sisters, one in Rockford and one in Peoria, Illinois.

**NELSON:** What was life like before the war and specifically during.

**SOWLE:** I graduated from Central High and entered the University of Illinois in the fall of 1940. I attended the university until the spring of 1941 and then left the school and went to work for the George Roper Corporation. I enlisted in the Naval Service, the Naval Air

Corps in 1942. I had worked at Ropers for 9 or 10 months.

**NELSON:** What thoughts did you have about the war before the United States became directly involved in the conflict?

**SOWLE:** It seems to me that I wasn't really involved. Didn't think a lot about it. But as I recall, I was interested, I think, in sports and things like that. I did have a hobby. I was a camp(?) gremlin in the years at high school until I went into the service. Don't think I was really conscious of the situation until we went into the war. Then right then I thought it was time to enlist.

**NELSON:** Did you go because of the December 7<sup>th</sup> bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese? If so, where were you and what were you doing at that time?

**SOWLE:** At the time I was bowling on a Sunday afternoon. I don't recall the lanes but I remember the announcement and that kind of took care of the bowling. At the time there was sort of a somber reaction, as I recall.

**NELSON:** What was your reaction as to responsibility?

**SOWLE:** I was, of course, astounded, mad, upset about it ... it was the topic of conversation for a good long time. Along with the group of people I was associated with at that time, several of us enlisted over the next two to three months.

**NELSON:** Do you recall any newspaper accounts of things and events in Europe?

**SOWLE:** Yes, I do. I remember that was a concern of mine at the time.

**NELSON:** Did you ever know of Hitler's speeches, his actions?

**SOWLE:** Yes, I did. I was just amazed at his transgressions and like everybody else felt something had to be done about it.

**NELSON:** What events led to your military service? Were you drafted or did you enlist?

**SOWLE:** Actually I was—I volunteered but I was aware of the fact that my number was coming up. At least I thought it was.

**NELSON:** Was your response to entering into the military service influenced by your family and friends' attitude toward the war, or a threat to national security or any other considerations?

**SOWLE:** I'm sure it was. I was concerned because I had lost some associates and friends that had been in the service and had been involved. That, I think, was probably the main reason. And, of course, my father being a military man even though he did practice dentistry he was much involved in the Illinois National Guard here.

**NELSON:** When and where were you inducted?

**SOWLE:** I was inducted in Chicago in February of '42. I remember the name of J. Burlagen (?), an outstanding author at the University of Chicago who interviewed me. He talked to me about my enlistment.

**NELSON:** Did you have any special memories of this event?

**SOWLE:** Yes, I do. Because of that man, I can remember that I was impressed because I knew the name ... he really was a gentleman.

**NELSON:** How old were you then?

**SOWLE:** I was twenty-one.

**NELSON:** What happened after you were inducted and where were you sent?

**SOWLE:** I was sent to Iowa City for three months of physical fitness and basic training.

Primarily it was one-half day of physical fitness and one-half day of diabetics. I was a naval cadet ... air cadet ... and that did have quite a bit of math involved in it.

**NELSON:** What did you think of the training?

**SOWLE:** I thought it was excellent training. I remember my mother came down to visit me after the 3 months period of hard training. When my mother came down to visit, she was impressed with my physical health at that time. I remember that I had been smoking and I stopped because of the condition down there.

**NELSON:** Tell us about any other events pertaining to your training.

**SOWLE:** Well, we had 3 months of training there and then had liberty on weekends. If we could pass an aptitude test on Saturday, they let us out on Sunday afternoon for two or three hours. It was a rigorous training and I remember that I was whole heartedly involved in it. We left for Danville, Illinois. I just started pilot's training and was there for 5 months. Actually, it was scheduled for a 3 month period but because of the weather around Chicago a lot of our flying time was canceled. A lot of the flights were canceled because of the weather especially in the fall of the year. I remember that it took about six weeks to get in four hours of night flying. That was the last part of the course that we had to do. From there I went to Corpus Christi and was in the King Ranch outlying fields. Went through training there and graduated in August of '43.

**NELSON:** Do you recall friends and associates that you made with civilians at that time?

**SOWLE:** Not so much with civilians. I can't recall having any contact with civilians during the training. Immediately after graduation I went to Hawaii. There I joined a squadron that was sent to Guadalcanal and just part of that for 2 months.

**NELSON:** That was with the Navy?

**SOWLE:** Actually, when I graduated from Corpus Christi we had an opportunity to join a Marine Corps if you so desired. I inquired of Jerry Foss of \_\_\_\_?\_\_\_\_Corpus Christi where we talked with him. He told us of his exploits and a dozen of us could hardly wait to join the Marine Corps, which we did. There were Navy \_\_\_\_?\_\_\_\_ who couldn't believe this. After we graduated in the Marines, I was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant and for some reason ... I recall that I was to be married on that leave ... we were sent immediately to San Diego and then directly to Hawaii, so I had no leave for two years.

**NELSON:** Where did you go after completing your military training?

**SOWLE:** Well, we went directly to Hawaii and we—actually I was trained as a fighter pilot—but when we got to Hawaii—it was just after the bombing of Midway and they were replacing men into the squadrons that were on Midway. So as they were short of dive bomber pilots, four or five of us volunteered to join that squadron and go down to Guadalcanal. That's what we did.

**NELSON:** Were there \_\_\_\_?\_\_\_\_.

**SOWLE:** No, these were SPD's, dive bombers.

**NELSON:** I see. When you were sent overseas, how did you get there?

**SOWLE:** We took a boat to Hawaii and trained there for about 6 weeks. Then we took time going down to \_\_\_\_?\_\_\_\_ in the New Hebrides. That was the staging area for Guadalcanal.

**NELSON:** What was the \_\_\_\_?\_\_\_\_ up to this point?

**SOWLE:** I was impressed with it. As I recall it was very well organized and as I looked at the equipment that I was issued, I couldn't believe the way they took track of it. I just generally thought the service was very competent.

**NELSON:** Tell us about your experience entering your first combat zone.

**SOWLE:** Well, we were at Guadalcanal and then left with the squadron there and then we were based about 150 mile north at the island of [Lundel]. There we staged the first combat flight that I had been with and invaded Bougainville. We flew flight and dive bombing before the troops went in to land at Bougainville. I understood the Bougainville landing was just to develop three or four air strips so we could fly from [Lundel] into Bougainville. Then we could fly up and down from [Lundel]. and that's what our mission was.

**NELSON:** I see. Can you list for us in the order of occurrence the combat actions in which you were involved?

**SOWLE:** Yes. The first ... this wasn't combat action ... we were scheduled at [Lundel] and we were ... ten of us were sent back to Guadalcanal to pick up some new aircraft. I remember that we checked them out on the ground as they had been there for awhile. We checked them out on the ground and then took off. Once up my engine cut out and I went down and landed back on the runway. Got back and a guy looked at the engine, put a cap on the \_\_\_\_?\_\_\_\_ and that was my first experience in combat. In December of that year, 1943, we started bombing \_\_\_\_?\_\_\_\_. On the first mission I was shot down and spent 2 days in the water, was located and returned to my squadron. I was on leave then for a week or ten days and then started flying again. And that was the way that we operated in the Marine Corps. You had six weeks in combat and then we had ten days R and R (rest and relaxation) and then you were and in training for another six weeks. After that you were back into combat. You did that until your time was up and that's what we did. That was the procedure until I was relieved and sent back in November of 1944.

**NELSON:** When you were shot down in the water, what was that caused by?

**SOWLE:** The way we operated from down in [Lundel] it involved 65 dive bombers, 38 PBS and about 200 fighter planes. We all agreed on the lay up. We had fighter cover through all areas at 30,000 feet and 240180 then 12. We started our bombing range about 21,000 feet. We pushed over and got speed up over the target and, of course, then we went down. I was approaching [LaVel] and zeros were all over the place. One came up to our formation and exploded, probably a 20 millimeter cannon shot or something like that. My gunman got it and was killed immediately. It destroyed some of my controls so I had no rudder control but I had arm control. So I had to leave the formation because I couldn't stay in it and started back home. Of course there were planes all over the air ... all over the water ... and there was no use in telling anybody as we had radio silence. It didn't work anyway. So I started back home because I had no rudder control. To keep ahead I had to fly with one wing down and that probably saved my life as two zeros had started making runs on me. But because I was in a skid all the time it wasn't easy for them to destroy my aircraft. I started losing oil. Well, I got back and kept losing altitude and of course the zeros couldn't stay with me because I had a lot of fighter friends all over the sky. So I started back and I was losing altitude. Finally my engine conked out, lost all controls and had a water landing. The gunner was, of course, dead at the time as far as I could tell. I got in the water and got in my raft all right and then just started drifting. I struggled so much getting that boat out and then getting out of the water that I fell asleep. When I woke up I could see land ... it was Bougainville. So I got \_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_ so the current took me into the island. But Bougainville was 130 miles long and all we had was a perimeter of about 10 miles in the middle of this 130 miles so I drifted down the coast. Finally a day and a half or two days later I was opposite where we had our runway ... metal runways ... that we used as I described earlier. I thought for sure I would get into shore but I couldn't. So I was kind of frustrated. All of a sudden I heard machine guns and I thought, gee, they're strafing me. Well actually it was a navy pilot that signaled his leader that he was

dropping out of the formation because he had seen me. So he started circling me and pretty soon 4 or 5 others joined him. Then two PT boats came out and picked me up.

**NELSON:** Wonderful! I suppose this was a grand experience for you?

**SOWLE:** Yes, it was. I don't remember everything being real scary but when I first got hit at that altitude, my first inclination was to climb out and hit that parachute. But for some reason or other I stayed with it as I had a little control. So I felt that was fortunate. If I had bailed out earlier, boy, at that time they were shooting parachutes up so my chance of survival was nil.

**NELSON:** Would you have had a life raft if you had bailed out?

**SOWLE:** No, just in the water.

**NELSON:** This goes into the approximate number of casualties, how they would have occurred and how they were treated ...

**SOWLE:** Well, our casualties were ... usually they went down with the plane. We lost maybe in the squadron of 86 pilots, we lost maybe seven over the period of about 13 to 15 months.

**NELSON:** Now of this seven planes there were two men crews?

**SOWLE:** Yes, 7 planes and 14 crew members. Our squadron was 36 in number. We had 36 pilots and we lost 13 of them.

**NELSON:** Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

**SOWLE:** No. Not then it didn't. But to continue this saga, I came back in November of '44 and was married then went down to \_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_ and was acting as an instructor down there with the rescue TC, the new dive bomber they had developed. I was down there just six months and then they sent me back overseas. I

was in the Philippines for three months. I developed hemorrhoids to the point that they were going to send me home to have surgery. But by the time I got home on the ship the hemorrhoids disappeared and I never had any trouble since then.

**NELSON:** What did you think of the war so far?

**SOWLE:** As I said, I thought that it was a tremendous experience ... one you couldn't buy. It was fortunate you came out alive. You met a lot of good people and I never was really \_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_time. After hemorrhoids, I had about enough of it.

**NELSON:** Did you write many letters home?

**SOWLE:** Yes, I wrote quite frequently.

**NELSON:** Did you save letters?

**SOWLE:** Yes. One incident that was kind of different. Ronald Colman, the actor, was in a show and he interviewed servicemen overseas. He had a telephone hook-up and I was scheduled to be on that program and I was to talk to my fiancée. At the time she was at the telephone at home with her parents awaiting the call. For some reason it never got through.

**NELSON:** Did most of the other men write overseas letters?

**SOWLE:** I think so, yes. That was an important part in the service. We were involved in the thick of it in the islands down there. We didn't have any contact with civilians ... we had rest leave ... two rest leaves at ten days a piece in Sydney, Australia. Of course, that was a welcome relief.

**NELSON:** Did you forge close bonds of friendship with many or some of your combat companions?

**SOWLE:** Yes, I am still in contact with ... one recently passed away. There were four or five in

the squadron. We never had an organized reunion. It was an individual thing because our units were rather small. Our squadron, of course, was only 36 pilots and so we didn't have large groups. But I kept in contact with four of them now and as I said one has recently passed away. I lost track of others but two of them I still correspond with.

**NELSON:** Did you have any contact with captured or army prisoners?

**SOWLE:** No.

**NELSON:** What was the highlight occurrence of you combat experience or any other experiences that you can remember besides the ditching?

**SOWLE:** I will tell you one thing. When I was picked up by a PT boat I was taken to the hospital in Bougainville. Who should come in but a very good friend of mine by the name of Chuck Cross, a Rockford native. Chuck was a spotter for the artillery and he is now a G-5 as I recall. He flew around Bougainville and spotted for the artillery and kept in the area ... navy spotter. The first night I came in ... I wasn't in any kind of bad shape, maybe something from exhaustion so they automatically kept me over night. So he visited me. The next morning he went out on a mission and was shot down. He was shot down and if you know anything about jungles, Bougainville was real \_\_\_\_?\_\_\_\_, He was shot down in an area that is about 15 miles from where we had the lines. I found this out later, that when they crossed he was seriously hurt. However, his observer who was with him built him a lean-to and left him there and then went for help. The navy observer was found about six weeks later in a local garden. He had passed out from exhaustion. So that ... he'd been in the jungle more than two weeks. I don't remember the time, but he had an awful time getting back. Of course, he couldn't retrace his steps and he had no idea where he left Chuck Cross. I came back here to get married. I had a cold and my mother said that I should go down to the Nelson Hotel as they had a masseuse

down there. I was to go down and get a steam bath and try to get rid of the cold. I was telling the masseuse about military life as he was interested in what I was doing. When I told him about Chuck Cross, he excused himself. He returned with Chuck's military belongings and pleaded with me to go see Chuck's mother and tell her what had happened. It was probably the toughest thing I ever did in my life. Emotionally, I wasn't set for it but I did it. I'll never forget that as long as I live. She, of course, was appreciative but was still broken up over it herself. Still I think she thought there might be some way he'd be OK. That was really a strange experience.

**NELSON:** Tell me what you and other servicemen did to celebrate America's traditional holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

**SOWLE:** Well, I think — I can't recall what we did very much. Nothing impressed me that I remember as any kind of celebration on those holidays when we were away. Of course, in the jungle in the South Pacific it wasn't really like Christmas or Thanksgiving. The food was not as good as anywhere else. I do remember that they had Bob Hope and Jack Benny on the island. It was really a welcome relief and I thought Bob Hope did a splendid job. I was a little upset with Benny because he had a beautiful woman with him and he was kind of — he was a little liberal about sex in his program. I'm thinking of all these marines stuck on this island and you know, I didn't really appreciate that. I remember Bob Hope and Connie Lange and others really had a great show.

**NELSON:** When and how did you return to America?

**SOWLE:** I came back on a boat from the Philippines, landed in San Diego and discharged there. I was to take a troop train back to Chicago that night and then to return and I did. I was in charge of a car of the troops going to Chicago and then come right back to be discharged. I didn't have to do that and I was discharged. It

would have been tough to go home and then have to go back.

**NELSON:** Please tell us about your military rank and your decorations, especially your combat decorations.

**SOWLE:** I was finished as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Marine Corps. We had a presidential citation, of course. Had a — can't remember, I think — I know that I had four ribbons and I don't ...

**NELSON:** How many missions were you in?

**SOWLE:** I was in 39 missions and a lot of them in the Solomons and probably 15 the \_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_.

**NELSON:** In these missions did you run into any contact with planes or flack or any of that?

**SOWLE:** No. We had anti-aircraft covering the thing and zeros were there for the first 6 weeks. We disposed of all the airfields and then it was strictly bombing the aircraft, anti-aircraft and shipping that was using [LaBau] Harbor. In the Philippines we were with the Fifth Army and were bombing isolated pockets of Japanese that were still in the Philippines.

**NELSON:** How did you get along with the men with whom you came in contact?

**SOWLE:** Fine. As I recall we were a real close group and we had only one or two fellows that didn't fit in but the most part, there were 36 pilots and we were all living in tents. Maybe there was six men in a tent so it was pretty close contact. You had to get along.

**NELSON:** What was the most difficult thing you had to do in your military career experience?

**SOWLE:** Probably talking with Mrs. Cross about her son Chuck.

**NELSON:** Does any one thing stand out as being the most successful achievement in the

military service? How about when you got your wings? Was that a memorable time?

**SOWLE:** That was a memorable time. It started in October and went on to the next August. There were ups and downs, good times and bad times. When we had a bad flight because we checked flights with every plane every two weeks. So we had some stress. When it was all over we were pretty much relieved.

**NELSON:** But as a young fellow from Rockford, that was a pretty big deal?

**SOWLE:** Yes, it was quite a presentation.

**NELSON:** How did you learn about VE Day and what was your reaction?

**SOWLE:** VE Day we were in the Philippines and we were pretty much isolated. There was only one squadron as I say. We were with the Fifth Army and, of course, there was a celebration. We did have alcohol that was available at time ... somewhat.

**NELSON:** How did you learn about VJ Day and what was your reaction.

**SOWLE:** I was on my way home aboard a hospital ship. As you can well imagine, it was a very happy time ... quite a celebration.

**NELSON:** What is your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb where it was used against civilians and others in Japan?

**SOWLE:** I was very thankful that Truman did that because I know what would have happened if we had flown and engaged Japan. Our mission with the Fifth Army was — we were looking ahead and from what I could learn we were going to be aboard aircraft carriers and would have to go up and engage with Japan. The Fifth Army would lead and secure the fields. After we got through flying and bombing we were to land on their airfields. That probably would have been the worst possible thing that could possibly happen.

**NELSON:** I don't imagine the Japs would have taken any prisoners?

**SOWLE:** No.

**NELSON:** Has your opinion changed over the last fifty years?

**SOWLE:** No, I don't think so. I'm quite patriotic and I had a lot of difficulty right after the war. I was watching a parade and hearing military bands and it was quite an emotional stress. I couldn't handle that for a long time.

**NELSON:** Do you have any disabilities or a military pension?

**SOWLE:** No.

**NELSON:** Do you have any feelings or opinion of the military status or its policy?

**SOWLE:** No, I'm certainly convinced we have to maintain strength in the military as a deterrent for any type of action against us. I hope that people in charge maintain the level of the military.

**NELSON:** Do you have any contact with the Veterans' Administration?

**SOWLE:** No I don't other than my insurance.

**NELSON:** Would you like to tell us of how your family supported you during your military life?

**SOWLE:** They were very supportive. My father being an ex-military man was quite proud of me, as they all were. I got quite a bit of mail and occasionally a box from home. I always felt they were real supportive.

**NELSON:** How does your father fit into this war effort?

**SOWLE:** He was very proud of me, I know. He was rather ill at the time but he still is a military man from the word go.

**NELSON:** You mean as an instructor?

**SOWLE:** No, he was a volunteer. There is a plaque at East High School honoring his ROTC efforts.

**NELSON:** I see. What has this support meant to you?

**SOWLE:** My children have been interested in what they were doing I guess. They asked me many times about my experience. I have kept interested in flying. They've been very interested in what went on during the war.

**NELSON:** Every once in a while I'll ask in an interview if there is something else to be added.

Would you like to add to this interview?

**SOWLE:** There's not a thing. I think you're doing a great job.

**NELSON:** I enjoy it.

**SOWLE:** I felt that I probably was not going in the right direction by not going back to school — just spending money. But I've always been impressed with discipline and I think the Air Corps did a lot for me in shaping my future. I also give credit to my Dad for that.

**NELSON:** Well, John I enjoyed this interview. Thank you very much.